



Dek Unu Magazine

October 2021

At Work

Kip Harris

Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

Dek Unu publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

As evidenced by the world total of tourist photos of the inside of cathedrals and through the windows of air-conditioned buses, a country's visitors do not often see or walk the back streets. And as perhaps a similar number of credit card receipts might testify, interactions with cashiers and wait staff are far more common than real contacts with the locals. October's featured artist, Kip Harris, presents images from his large, international, multi-year study of workers at their jobs. Drawn from his travels for business and pleasure, these are portraits of real people, in their own environments, free of pretense and staging for tourists and tips. Above and beyond his technical skill, and in spite of differences in language and location, Harris has acquired a knack for authentic personal engagement with his "locals" and his "cathedrals" are workshops and storefronts off the beaten path. Quoting from Prufrock, Kip says his subjects, encountered in their own workplaces, do not need "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." These faces are striking in their honesty, their purpose, and their pride.

Harris grew up in a small farming community in Idaho. He holds degrees in English literature from Dartmouth College, in humanities from the University of Chicago, and architecture from the University of Utah. He was a principal of FFKR Architects in Salt Lake City for nearly 30 years. He now lives on the South Shore of Nova Scotia in an 1823 cottage overlooking St. Margarets Bay. He and his wife created Company X Puppets (a highly portable puppet, dance, theater group established to present intimate mixed media works).

Shoe Repairman, Buenos Aires

I had spent the morning in an indoor mercado in Buenos Aires. The lighting wasn't great and I was having trouble finding material. I left the shopping area and walked around the exterior of the building and found a dark shop that didn't appear to be open. Looking closer, I saw a man at work and walked in. He was surprised to be asked if I could take his photo and perhaps annoyed by the interruption but the light quality was too good to pass up.



Presser, Varanasi

While most of the tourist interest in Varanasi is along the banks of the Ganges, the interior streets are filled with local activity. This presser is using an iron where burning charcoal is placed inside the iron. The entire operation is on the street and passersby gossip and comment on the work. My wife's day job for many years was as a costumer. She is a compulsive ironer and many of my shots of people dealing in some way with fabric are taken for her.



Cooking Oil Merchant, Jaipur

“Cooking Oil Merchant” was taken as a sort of homage to Cartier-Bresson and his famous image, taken in Valencia, Spain, 1933, where one lens of a gentleman’s glasses is a silver reflection. My subject was very patient in allowing me to move around so that I could catch a similar effect.

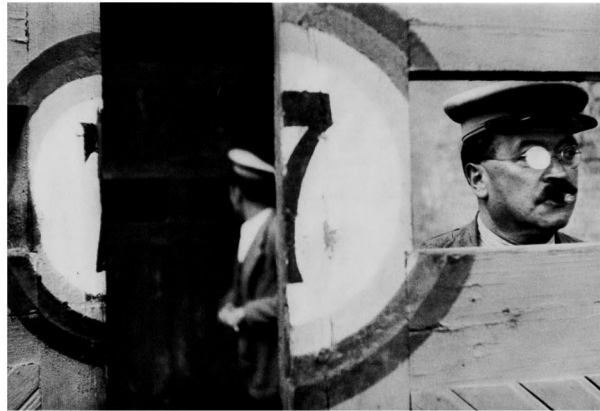


Image: “Inside the Sliding Doors of the Bullfight Arena.” Scan taken from *The Decisive Moment*, Henri Cartier-Bresson, facsimile production and printing by Gerhard Steidl, 2014, original Simon and Schuster, July 1952.



Clara Warming Up, Havana

The Ballet Nacional de Cuba, like most large ballet companies, uses its Christmas season performances of *The Nutcracker* as a money maker. Children are included as performers and this always brings in the parents, grandparents, and extended families. The premier role for the young dancers is that of Clara who is typically the best female dancer coming out of the associated dance school. I was back stage before a performance of *The Nutcracker* in the Great Theatre of Havana in December, 2011, and captured that year's Clara watching herself warming up.



Plastic Recyclers, Mumbai

The United Nations Habitat program defines slums as informal settlements that lack one or more of the following five conditions: access to clean water, access to improved sanitation, sufficient living area that is not overcrowded, durable housing, and secure tenure. The Dharavi slum in Mumbai lacks all five.

This is one of the largest slums in Asia and, with a population of 720,000 per square mile, one of the most densely populated areas in the world. It grew out of the British relocation of polluting industries into the area in the 1850s. The population is multiracial and multicultural. Approximately a quarter of a million people work in recycling. Household enterprises generate over one billion US dollars per year. Dharavi is subject to floods and epidemics but is consistently rebuilt. It was used in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*.



Fisherman, Kochi

Fort Kochi, in the southern Indian district of Kerala, is famous for its fisherman and open air fish markets. Fresh fish are brought directly from the water to the market. Big game fish tend to be caught from the armada of small boats that roam the waters but many of the smaller fish are taken directly from the shoreline by fisherman casting nets or from boats pulling nets behind them. This gentleman was removing fish from the nets he had used from the boat he is standing next to and placing them in a plastic bucket to be taken to the market.



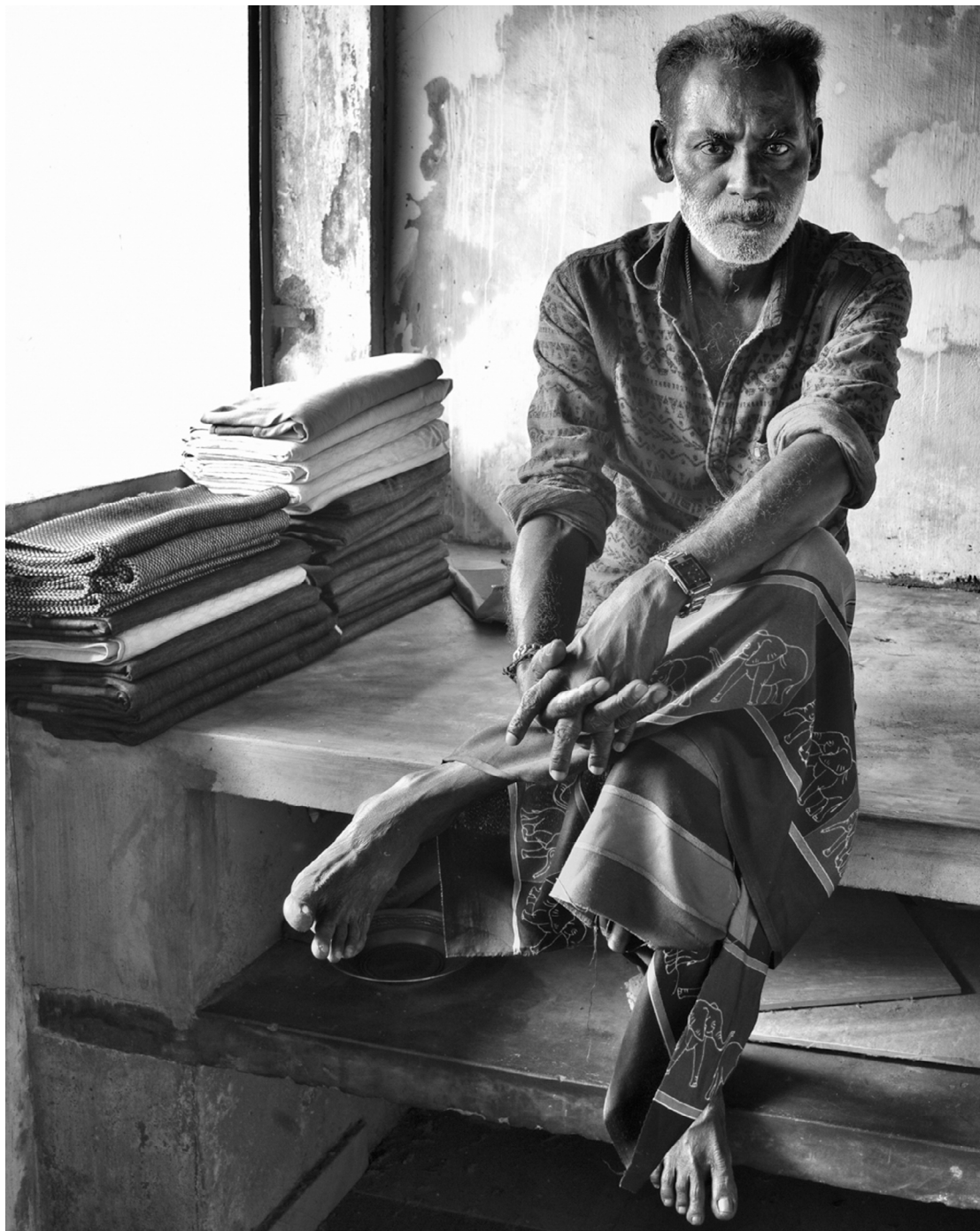
Carnival Techie, Kerala

Many religious events in India have a sort of carnival sideshow that is part of the festivities. At the Feast of St. Sebastian held in Cherthala, a multi-acre site near the church is converted into a series of food outlets, craft sales, fireworks booths, rides for children and adults. We arrived early enough in the day to be able to see part of the set up for the carnival side. This gentleman is setting up a sugar cane booth. The sugar cane is used to sweeten drinks or is chewed after being cut into short sticks.



Laundry Folder, Dhobi Khana

This image might be better entitled “Laundry Folder Watcher.” This gentleman was sitting on a shelf watching his wife fold laundry that had been washed by hand in a communal laundry. While she was hard at work, he retained a certain regal aura reinforced by the wristwatch he so proudly displayed. This was originally shot in color but then converted to black and white because of the powerful and dramatic light coming through the window.



Street Sweeper, Azcuenaga

Many of the small rural towns in Argentina have unpaved roads. A common sight along these streets is people sweeping the area in front of their homes. For many this happens several times a day. The gentleman shown here was sweeping his section of road edge when I asked if I could take his photo. With a look that might be called, "Argentinian Gothic," he patiently complied.



Ear Cleaner, Hanoi

A lot happens in the streets of Vietnam: food preparation, cock fights, open air bars, scooter repair, computer part exchanges, hair stylists, personal hygiene of all sorts. Barber shops on the street are common, as are ear cleaners. Like in India, ear cleaning appears to be a valued profession.

This photo is typical of many of mine where I use mirrors / reflections to be able to create a sort of cubist-style portrait. I like being able to see more than one aspect of a person / situation at the same time. I also use mirrors as a way of seeing but not being seen.



Accounting Wall, Hoi An

This shot was taken in a Buddhist temple in the city of Hoi An, Vietnam. The pieces of paper on the wall are receipts for donations that are used to purchase incense coils. The coils are hung from the ceiling of the temple. The ritual is a bit like that of purchasing and lighting candles in Catholic churches. The man with the iPad takes your donation and keeps track of the accounting. There is a different group of people who do the calligraphy.



The roots of your *At Work* series go way back!

Working has always been something I enjoyed. From my first real job on an asphalt crew at sixteen through to managing a large architectural design group, I found work to be that which defined me. I remember being advised by older construction workers that, while I was a hard worker, I should stay in school and “do something.” I found they were far more profoundly dedicated to craft and honest labor than my fellow Ivy League students, who tended to look for the easy way to do something.

Growing up in southeastern Idaho in the 1950s, you learned how to work early. There was a “spud harvest vacation” from school for two weeks each fall. School children would work in the fields helping harvest potatoes, often leaving home at dawn and returning at dusk. I remember “digging spuds” starting when I was nine or ten years old. We were paid seven cents a sack.



I worked a variety of jobs: as warehouse stocker, map reader, janitor, paperback manager of a book store, construction worker, sports store clerk, and speechwriter for a US Congressional candidate. After grad school at the University of Chicago and three years teaching at a private school in the Sierras, I went back to school at the University of Utah. The lights were on all night in the

architecture building. I figured that if people were willing to spend that much time working on something, it must have some magic.

Regardless of language or location, your images show a clear engagement with each of your subjects. How do you do that?

When people are in their own workplaces, they are most at ease with themselves. They do not need “to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.” I try to stand and watch a little before photographing to convey my appreciation for the worker’s skill and engagement. A man’s work is his life and should be respected. It also gives me a chance to have eye contact and that makes all the difference. Where it is not possible to ask permission to shoot, I try to capture what each worker might wish to say about himself.

There is a Taoist phrase: “wei wu wei,” which has been translated a number of ways, but the one I like best is “doing, not doing.” When one has become a complete master of an action, he no longer has to think about how to perform the act but has become the act himself. I look for this mastery and hope to record it. I feel it is important to convey to the subject that I have respect for both his work and his space. I approach slowly with a very small camera that is hand held. I only use available light. I have found that a very soft voice works wonders. Being able to show the adjacent workers the image on the LCD screen sometimes encourages them to want to be photographed. They also know when you’ve captured the real thing and may suggest you do it again. They are great editors.

How did the photography thing start for you?

I had always assumed that walking around with a camera made you simply look for things to photograph—to look at the world through “Kodachrome eyes.” After completing an emotionally

draining architectural project, I took a sabbatical from my job and traveled through England, Scotland, and Ireland with a backpack. My wife suggested that I take her camera along to document what I was doing. When I started using her camera, I realized that I could see the world more precisely and accurately through the lens than without it. It made me look more carefully. When I got back home, I took a couple of darkroom classes. This was back in 1990. I started photographing seriously from that time on, during vacations and to document my wife's choreography projects. I stopped working full-time in 2004 when we moved to Nova Scotia and I began to submit my work for shows and publication more regularly.

Most photographers remember an early photo that started it all; one that "worked." Do you remember yours?



Magna Taco Time 1991

Most of my early photographs were either documentary or copycat. I got pretty good at finding things to photograph that "looked pretty" or were attempts to do a Lewis Baltz or an Atget. People liked some of them but for me they seemed timid or voyeuristic. The first image that felt like something closer to how I looked at the world was taken in a fast food outlet in the scruffy little town of Magna, Utah. It was November and raining. I was trying out a new camera (Mamiya 6). My wife and I were the only people in the restaurant except for a young girl quietly crying over her taco. The photo

seemed to capture the desperation of suburbia and the plight of people locked into that world. I still like the photo. It was the first time I was able to use composition, texture, and light to convey what I wanted to say.

The range of your experience is extraordinary. Talk about how all of that influences your photography.

I think that everything you do impacts your creative work. Just as repeating some of Joseph Albers color experiments makes you more attuned to how one color changes the perception of another, no part of experience stands alone. I'm a big advocate of an enormously wide education and variety of work experience.

I got much better at filing and sorting and organizing by having been a clerk in bookstores. How I work on my property is impacted by having spent time in the fields as a kid. I enjoy reshaping landscapes because of the topographical understanding gained by doing site plans. I photograph seascapes because I walk my dog along the Atlantic every day. Having worked as a construction laborer makes it easier for me to approach people working with their hands.

Architectural training is good preparation for understanding basic composition but I was never interested in the stiff and formal world of architectural photography, in part, because it never moved. Designing large projects is a very collaborative endeavor. My last design project had more than 100 people working on it in four countries and three states. Photography allows me, alone, to be in control of an entire process. If I fail, it is my fault. If I don't like what I am doing, I can change. Creating construction documents is about getting details right. It is very precise and methodical. That is what editing a photograph is like. Everything matters. People will not die if you don't get it right but it makes you careful and patient.

In traveling, I have concluded that we are complex critters who make better associations if we know more. The more we experience of other cultures the more we are tolerant of our own.

The images in this issue are a small part of a very much larger *At Work* project. How long have you been at it?

The first *At Work* image was taken in Hong Kong. I was there to review furniture being made mostly by hand for a long-term client of our firm. The shop was on the top floor of a high rise right in the flight path of Kai Tak Airport. The roof was used for kiln drying lumber. My job was to check on the correctness of their work, but what I was interested in was how they did it.



Luk's Artistic Furniture, Hong Kong, 1990

When I started traveling to “less developed” countries, I found myself taking more and more photographs of people doing what they do in their own workplaces. I enjoyed both their craft and their pleasure in creating with their hands. The number of these sorts of images grew and grew.

You’ve traveled the world. On your own? With photo tours?

Most of my travel before 2010 was on my own as part of a vacation. I became more interested in street photography and decided to do a photo workshop in Mexico with Harvey Stein. That trip and the

exposure to the way Harvey works changed my approach. I became less timid about going right up to someone and asking if I could take a picture. Since 2010, I've done a number of other workshops and individual trips. My favorite place to photograph is in northern India. The most difficult is in Morocco where there is often a very strong objection to being photographed.

Do you miss "wet" darkroom photography?

What I miss from the darkroom is the magic of seeing an image pop out of the developer. Nothing can match that moment. Seeing negatives in sleeves or even a contact sheet is not the same thing as a big, shimmering, silver object that is stable in its realness. It doesn't change, while your memory of the moment when you captured it fluctuates.

When I shot film, I was very careful about framing and making certain that everything was perfect before pushing the shutter. Film was expensive, creating prints was slow and backbreaking. You didn't want to waste money, time, and energy on something you thought might not work. With a digital camera, I work very differently. Instead of having a couple of rolls of film from a weekend of shooting, I now have 2,000 images to select from. I still compose in the camera the same way but I take more chances. I try things in multiple ways. I change exposures and depth of field. I'm more carefree. The boring part comes in the editing. Hours spent pouring over very similar exposures to find the right one takes patience and a comfortable environment. I built my own darkroom and spent many hours in that gloomy and airless space. I have now built a studio for myself which has plenty of light and looks out over St. Margaret's Bay. I prefer the latter.

Your "workflow?" How do you get from "search" to "done?"

Okay. I usually carry two small cameras with me. One is a monochrome Leica (black and white images only); the other a mirrorless Sony. I look first of all for lighting situations that provide

contrast; then I look for subject matter and what is behind the subject. I take probably 5 to 10 images of the same person (for the *At Work* series). I download the SD card as soon as possible and sort the images by a rating system. After getting the number of “okay” shots, via several more critical ratings, down to a manageable number, I do a preliminary development pass in *Lightroom*. When I get back to my studio, I will look again at the initial review and decide which few I actually want to work on. My normal workflow is to reopen the selections in *Lightroom*. I’ll do some cropping and exposure adjustments plus spot removal. If I’m working in black and white, I’ll move the image to *Silver eFex Pro* to adjust the overall and spot contrast. Then to *Photoshop* to clean up the odd telephone wire or glaring light bulb.

Your process is incremental. How do you know when an image is done?

I never know if a photo is finished. Depending upon the need, I might recrop images so that they are all in an identical format or I might change the contrast a bit to increase or reduce emphasis. I’ve been doing more revisiting during Covid since I don’t have new material. Over the last year, I reviewed my thousands of seascapes to find the most minimal images. Then I adjusted the layout so that the horizon line fell at the bottom one-third point. To emphasize the liminal edge, I sometimes blurred the ocean slightly. This *Horizon Series* is very uniform and meditative, almost Zen-like in intent.



Horizon Series, June 7, 2016

Does “finished” mean “printed” for you or do you create for and favor digital distribution?

I do think of a print as the final version of an image. I print my own work and I tinker a bit with each iteration; so, in a way, there is no finished version. I do limited editions of the prints but there might be a slight variation between each print. It is, however, much more convenient and economical to distribute works digitally. Without publishers like *Dek Unu*, many works might never be seen. I am always hopeful that someone may see an image online and want to see, or better yet, own a print.

Artists are often skilled critics and curators. Anything going on in Photoworld that you especially like?

I like to hear people talk about how to get the rabbit in the hat; perhaps in the vein of Fred Astaire who reportedly once commented during a rehearsal: “Let’s get the steps down; we can put the smiles on later.” Most artists I have known have no idea what their work is about. It is simply something that they feel a need to express without a predetermined overarching message. As soon as it fits cleanly into something that can be defined, it can become dull and repetitive. James Joyce once said that the only good criticism of a work of art is another work of art. I agree.

What keeps you going? How do you measure success?

In architectural school and in practice, there was a phrase often used to decide if you want to continue along a particular direction with a design – “Does it sing.” On the rare occasions when a photograph sings and touches me emotionally and reappears in my imagination over and over, I find that it makes the effort worthwhile.

At a cocktail party or an opening, I’ll get the normal, polite: “Oh, I really like your work,” but that is usually about all. I have had two comments that I value: one from my wife – “There is nothing here that doesn’t need to be,” and one from a person I have never met, about seascapes – “Your work makes my eyes smile.”

May we have a guided tour of your studio?



My workspace and equipment have evolved from my architectural work. When we moved to Nova Scotia, I was commuting to the States for one week a month while I worked electronically the rest of the time. I needed to be able to print half-sized sets of architectural drawings so the office bought me an Epson 4800 Stylus Pro. I got to select which printer I wanted so I made certain I could print photos as well. I used a Wacom pen tablet to be able to redline architectural drawings by hand (instead of by CAD) and send them back to my office in Salt Lake City. I now use it with my photo editing software to do stylus-controlled adjustments.

I built a large sliding tray as a keyboard holder under an eight-foot-long Shaker trestle table I had built from a kit. This allows me to have two keyboards to service the laptop business computer and the personal photographic computer. I move back and forth between them all day. I use a large NEC monitor for proofing and an old Minolta Dimage Scan Multi Pro along with *VueScan* software to scan my film negatives. I have always worked on Apple computers.

I use a Leica Monochrom 246 for most of my environmental portrait work. My go to lens is an old 35mm/1.4 that I bought in the 1990s.

My second camera is a Sony a7R4 which I use for color and on my daily shoreline dog walks, in all kinds of weather. I like the a7R4 for its high resolution, which allows me to crop heavily, and its silence, which lets me work where noise would be a problem. I am working with my third Sony, having ruined two earlier ones shooting in the rain and snow.

Thank you, Kip! What's in the future? A show, book, article, more travel?

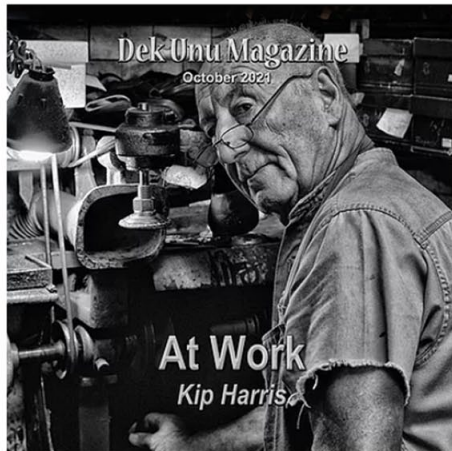
I hope to be able to travel to Jordan next March. *Street Photography Magazine* will be publishing an article entitled "On Being Seen" sometime before December. I'm still slowly attempting to formulate the "At Work" series into something that an analog book publisher would be interested in and I'll continue to submit work out into the ether.

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